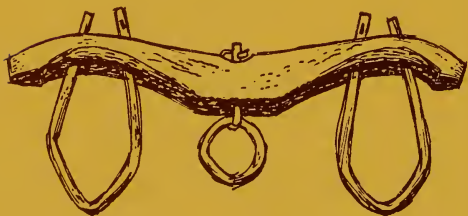


John Malcolm Brinnin

THE
LINCOLN
LYRICS

The Poet of the Month

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John Malcolm Brinnin

THE
LINCOLN
LYRICS

The Poet of the Month

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To

JOHN HINSDALE THOMPSON

New Directions Books are published by James Laughlin



I. *Prologue to a Legend.*

Tell this for legend in America:
The simple figures, gaunt as Dakota stone,
Bear lineaments we know; they are not Greek,
Nor do they ride pretentious tapestries

Imperious and feudal in the weave;
They wear humility like living men
Who try their mortal gifts against the earth
And every threat of scheming history.

Our fathers' fathers knew their casual touch:
A wedding dress, a collar box, perhaps,
Or one declining corner of a plot
Of violet and rose among grey ash

Repeats in quiet their late enterprise.
Since stone and legal words are incorrect
Accents, memorials corrupt their laughter.
Restatement is the barest theme for truth.

Man is responsible, and we who live
Float on the memory of time, since blame
Will never hold its heavy tongue until
Decision gleams emphatic as a tool.

Look, then, behold your house of victory:
The deed is yours, the décor charming as
Cape Cod antiques. But O the hinges creaking,
Unsure sand around, the wicked visitors!

II. *The Birth.*

A cinema of winter, and the rude
Unbolted place stands in the ponderous snow;
Cruelty of birth—great shadows wait
Fateful as the shapes of history.

And stars are blind: they keep, in sterile air,
Their classic empires. Prophetic as
First crocuses beneath the teeth of snow,
A man is born who is unpencilled there,
While February's landscape fades before
The wavering tallow's wan and furthest finger,
While woods and awkward cities, documents,
Wait on the plains of hushed America.

Huge in their myths return the ancestors,
Earth's old mortality with rituals
Abroad at morning, trading life for death,
Drinking the winnowed breath of infancy.

Somewhere a limp cold banner lolls unseen;
A loghouse crumples in its burning ruins
Signing the dark with barbarism's cross;
Somewhere a congress of enlightenment.

Abe Lincoln of that odyssey, he comes
To danger, patience, and the book of chance;
Hung on the edge of dark, disturbing none,
Moves strangely toward our radiant wilderness,
While dawn, symphonic with the clink of pans,
The warm and lovely water spilled on day,
Swings through the clearing like a sword, lifts
The slow assuring smoke affirming life.

III. *Childhood and Wilderness.*

Wild woods will ravel up what mystery
Invades a child; no telling trace is there,
No sound but those imagined high halloos,
Stopping the nearby hunter in his tracks.

There is such wisdom in one afternoon
Of intricately quiet thought; a child
Will sight the beaches of antipodes
Across his acorn-punctuated space.

And when lean deer come nuzzling through the brush
There is a natural faith enjoined, for June
Is beautiful embroidered with such noise;
There is ambition in a fringe of grass.

Bewildered children learn to know the lines
Demarking fact; as clever with an axe
As with green definitions, they will unlearn
Bird-talk and daisies, accept the sober night.

Lissom as hickory, the young Abe Lincoln
Cobbled the years hard-handed, blunt;
Learned figures, Aesop, and the ways of men,
While discipline that would not hold his legs

Nor spare his arms one sample of town grace,
Walled in his mind a citadel. He walked
Tall in the knowledge quartered there, calm in
The graceless strength of powerful possession.

IV. *Shinglers by Moonlight.*

So bended to the artistry that shapes
A roof to house a son, dark builders, touched
With time's most cold ophelian kiss, place
Board on board across the slanting night,
While through the windless villages there pass
A regiment of skeletons, dead kings,
Pathetic ladies whose tiaras top
The rougeless bones of waltzing infamy;

And Boone and Clark, and nameless voyagers,
And that late rider out of Lexington;
Dice and the devil or sweet voices in
A dream propelling all directions west.

Here shingles measure out accomplishment
More permanent than steeple, turret, or
The lightning-taloned skyscraper, since man
Has come to grant a tenancy to man.

No clock chimes off the midnight to the fields,
No reveller halloos. Silence is all,
Until, across cathedrals of the gathered corn,
The distance echoes with a roofer's art.

Abe Lincoln, son of these, and of the sad
Parading dead, takes from the night that truth
So shaped by harvest and a sleeping house;
Against the elements that will prevail,
Against the wilful moon, the shinglers climb;
Though earth, air, fire, water come
With beast-gods out of wilderness and death,
None may undo their subtle space of roof.

v. *Somewhere in Illinois.*

This is the country of corn; whatever else
The eye affirms is unexpected here;
Like Babylon and Egypt, roads repeat
Earth's river-valley cultures in the West.
All elements the city keeps in rooms—
Wind-symphony, cloud-color, speech of crows—
Ungathered and as manifest as grain
Establish here their freer harmonies.

Man is but incidental here: so few
Are counted in an all day ride, who turn
Like wistful strangers wreathed in promises;
Grave-digging is an amateur's employment.

Where men have seasonal emotions, struck
With terror at the frost, with laughter in
The rain's periphery, some child will come
Who dreams on broken lilacs for the Town,

A life at sea, perhaps, a cluttered desk
In some grey corner of the Bodleian;
As vulnerable as these, Abe Lincoln walks
With Blackstone in a cabalistic book.

Some will escape to test illusion in
The court and counting-house; some will return
With tears to spend, or anger; none will learn
More quiet than a single grave allows.

The characters of ancestry come down
Unutterably estranged; who knows the boy
With lilacs in his teeth, alert for words
Like miracles, somewhere in Illinois?

vi. *A Man Named Lundy.*

With eyes as loud as branding irons came
Across the swanlike winter in the north
A man named Lundy, hard as truth: "I'll not
Equivocate; I'll not excuse," trekking

The phosphorescent pines, a Quaker god,
Searing the wilderness with love like flame,
Haloed with hate and vicious as a blade:
Some hand-press clapped, the *Liberator* spoke,

Plotting the crooked streets of Boston with
Its manifesto. Loud the news, as grave
As Exodus, that reached the florid south,
Its ringed aristocrats, its collared hounds.

So, in the arctic precincts of a land,
One heart, inflamed for justice, blazes in
Monastic dark; appears, archangel-like,
Upon the argumentative plateaus

Of politics and men. The embryos
Of battle, then, twist in the secretive womb,
And nations under parapet or sod
Spell out their warning cryptogram of bones.

Dark forests will surrender and swift waters,
And gold's caressive plenty charm the race;
And buckskinned feet will arrow through the leaves,
The years be clocked in notches on a limb.

On every frontier every spring will show
An architect's success, a winter won
With clapboard, nails and hammers in the north,
White Grecian pillars in the easy south.

Yet all must range toward justice on the plains
Gigantic with the gunshot voice of war:

"I saw the vision in a carriage wheel."

"I read the total in a book of sums."

A violent mural in some courthouse speaks,
Now faceless and impersonal, the smoke
And blood, forgotten as Thermopylae,
As the man named Lundy.

vii. *A New Salem Era.*

New Salem, perishable as a wagon track,
Brute with its gangs and whiskey, glittering cocks
Electric from the gamer's hands; the grim
Unsubtle pleasures of the artless young.

Abe Lincoln, clerk, rail-splitter, wag, looks on.
His legend is begun; nor may poor jokes
Tossed in the lazy noon, the mulish fun,
The bumpkin answers parcelled with the grain,
Mark in that history one upbraiding fact.
He, who in the aching corridors of Self,
Takes commerce with cold voices, fate, and all
Those clamoring inmost angels of unrest,
Grows in some image of his fellows, learns
Their common helplessness; that music, low,
Too subtle for the tensile voice of strings,
Sounds in the westering speech of naive fathers.

Here prairies make philosophy, no less
Than woods, experience of rivers, print
Of human accident: a rich, untutored
Nation roams toward mastery in the west.

Frontiers are hopes. Slow is the learned way
Of human dignity: Abe Lincoln's eyes
Drink, in the niches of routine, a love
Explosive to the mind's most winglike touch.

viii. *The Single-Gestured One.*

These annals pause, humanity's the theme:
The midnight knuckle-hard concern of man
For lovers fabulous in books, for girls
Like Helen in the wide, star-littered dark.

And one, the always single-gestured One,
Who stops a little while poised like the spring;
Ann Rutledge here, most touchable and true,
As basketed and prim as Market Row,
For her Abe Lincoln stumbles in the sun
As soft and witless as an animal;
For her (O Song of Songs on Illinois)
The pagan sunset swamps an evening.

And in the dominoes of casual talk
He learns felicity as feminine
As lace, those innuendoes harboring
Imperial drums of passion in the blood.

Turned mute with moral prettiness and looks,
They who in some great amorphous bed
Should tend the midnight luxuries of love,
Loll by a gate with burning fingertips.

Struck, brute to the heart of loveliness,
Death's easy error, Ann Rutledge leaves
(O less than Helen in the red torchlight)
A slightly swaying resonance on air.

Abe Lincoln, in his proper coat, walks late—
Through other years, through other grieving towns
Archaic with such memory that speaks
A litany tragic as his book of days.

IX. *Springfield Was a Different Place.*

Old Springfield was a different place: the rich
On glamorous lawns, and their great carriages
Bouqueted with elegance, that clopped through mud;
In twilight, music, and a rush of girls.

Between Abe Lincoln and a bed, there stood
Some seventeen bright dollars: "I looked up
At him," said Joshua Speed, "thought then as I
Do now, I never saw in all my life

A gloomier, more melancholy face."
And apprehension shared his double bed
And ate his proffered food: Abe Lincoln stood,
A townsman on the grocery steps, and smiled.

The phases of the moon on Illinois
Prefix the little crises: freemen go
To swell the ballot boxes with his name:
A great wheel turns that will not once be still.

They say in Springfield how he walks at night
From this to that and slowly back again;
Among the traffic and the signs they say
He fingers relics, alone and dispossessed.

x. *Harriet Beecher Stowe.*

Came, Diana-drawn, across the hills
That lady with a shawl, reigning a crew
(Balloons and propaganda for the mob)
Of devil-kids and undernourished angels;

Legree and Mr. Tom and frosted Eva,
Walked (O difficult unsalvaged truth)
On crutches of conviction; spoke, before
Some windy backdrop, tall church sentences.

Bad art is served in crucibles of change:
Myopic pencils, hurrying to record
Issues and men before the scar is cold,
Scribble on cornerstones their graceless shapes.

She who in shaded sewing-rooms might keep
Impeccable company for some five or six,
Walked, in the weed-like legend of the street,
Triumvirate with bald Rousseau and Paine.

Where lies the villainy? There is such choice
Between mortalities of art and men;
Though perfection keeps autonomy in stone
Serene before men's feverish intellects,

He who in the wide and Galatean cold
Disputes with life will bend his ways toward death,
Trading his chisels for a Nazi's gun,
While the devious dynamics of the will

Shape triumph in the place of his denial.
The great man grounds his masterpiece in men.
The shuttle weaves in dual vehemence,
This way for life, this way for perfect death.

xI. *The Wedding Day.*

Compelled by morning and that static way
Fixed on the calendars of men, Abe Lincoln
Wakens on his wedding day—the dawn
Is dangerous and dull, his heart

Cracks upon compulsion and great doubt.
How share this dark? How name a pathos in
That caged and ever pity-weighted brain?
How say, this is the way, how say, this way?

Like proper clowns come to the carnival,
The pastel guests arrive. Sweet Mary in
Her gown, in conversation's filigree,
Awaits the gifts of all his fumbling love.

Confounding calendars, Abe Lincoln leaves
Lily and candle, clergyman and cake,
So dispossessing tribal appetites
Their curse is on his antic and his life.

There is an illness in a man of thought
Will plague his happiest design; the hand
Of no physician dare eradicate
Those symptoms of superiority.

But O, each thirsty guest, the iron date,
Will have their victory. Plump Mary Todd,
Come to penultimate control, will pin
Felicitations to her breast like beads.

Surrendered as the seasons to the flux
And fibre of the year, Abe Lincoln kneels
To join his hand with hers, in silence takes
The clamping cold exchange of ring and vow.

Then does some momentary rebel in
The stars come back, converted to the arch
Of blind eternity. And on the earth
Astronomers of custom breathe relief.

XII. *Mary Todd: the Story of a Wife.*

The story of a wife is nominal
With bread, the distaff nebulae of Home;
She parcels tokens, letters of romantics,
Exotic as a touring opera.

Call Mary Todd to judgment for her faults,
(Who bed with greatness are accountable)
Read, in the lamplit opulence of evening,
Ambition like a gun-prod in the back.

The hands that rock the cradle smell of blood:
They are the instruments of policy
Who come, in masks of hollyhocks and lace,
To matriarchal reckonings with men.

They who among the crockery and plants
Must disavow the world, take vengeance in
Their tyrannies of loneliness and need;
Magnificent their quietude in rooms.

Who would dispraise the methods of emotion
Is not here, yet breasts of monstrous mothers keep
The paralytic signals of Return,
Return: they own both property and tears.

For Mary Todd, so bonded to the dance,
A place among them and the usual praise;
Celebrants of chance, card-wise, have said
Her table shone with rubies and good bread.

XIII. *The Issue.*

Spoke then on high, through feedshop parliaments
And civic porticoes, one bladed mind:
"A house divided shall not stand!"—the catch
Come cataracting out, the issue bare.

And Mr. Greeley's *Tribune*, neatly placed
In rooms of waxen flowers and stuffed fish,
Spread out in warmth beyond some kitchen stove,
Reports that quarried secret to the crowd.

Bifocalled, curious, the gentry read,
And perilously catch each others' eyes:
Those clerical interiors submit,
Impossibly berated with the fact.

What though a gift of plums be wrapped in it,
Or princely children crease it into hats?
Abe Lincoln holds the afternoon, speaks out
A tottering information, guessed for years.

"What in God's name induced you to such words?"
—The agitated friend drums on his hat—
"Upon my soul," Abe Lincoln quietly,
The door aswing, "I think it is the truth."

XIV. *Dred Scott: The Whispering Fires Move.*

An error in a pillared house, the nine
Acknowledged heads upon the fatal letter
Of the law, may complicate the earth with arms,
Blueprint its plains for stratagem and war.

And say it was, mechanically devised,
Missouri Compromises, or the life
Of one unscheduled negro in revolt;
Whatever framed the circumstances here,
Abe Lincoln knew, and turned that ponderous way.
Now did the dream, the dagger, and Macbeth
Surprise his consciousness with war as real
As any published murderer abroad.

Such whispering fires in the hearts of men
As will not be constrained in painted rooms,
Sped on midsummer grasses and hill towns,
Across the Smokies regular as pews.

And spider-active fingers of black print,
Webbing the lineaments of enmity,
Climbed in the blazing silence toward a grip
Unloosable without the brands of war.

A public man with memory is rare:
Abe Lincoln, as contained as a book,
Leans on the great unfinished maps to meet
Fiery harvests and a doorless wall.

Give praise for this, and apple-sweetened song,
Give monuments and laws horizonless,
Instruct the great among us with white votes,
We will come through; choice is our destiny.

xv. *Poor Mister Douglas.*

Dead-wrong though principled, a model for
Our governors, Stephen A. Douglas kept
His alternating bell in famous tune;
Abe Lincoln followed in a red plush train,
Clever with tricky figures, but more apt
(The chill swan-rushing moment of release)
To stem debate with some transcendent word
Bewildering to partisan and foe.

Poor Mister Douglas with his book of facts,
His drummer's reason and belligerent charm,
Redramatized the Bible with his arms
And shivered in hotel rooms lucklessly.

Victorious Mister Douglas with his votes,
His shining future with the laity,
Escapes those cold encounters, leaves the field
As wakened children leave a dream of bears.

He knows a violence he cannot name,
And that arena of the naked worlds
Where men so chosen wrestle toward the stance
Of coming generations on the earth.

Like all who tenuously reign, he feels,
As wounded men their rain-prophetic arms,
Defeat for friendly faces and a year
Chaotic with new draughtmanship and crowds.

Some deference, then, unto the Other Side;
They too were frightened early, learned to hate;
Respect their rules, since you have lived by them,
But kill when they consult alternatives.

XVI. *The Statement.*

"If slavery is not wrong, nothing is wrong"—
Not pity, nor the thumbs of wrath, but truth
Diamond as statistics in the print;
Abe Lincoln stands committed to his text.

Now murmurs of enforced humility
Come, multiplied, in painted skirmishes;
The unmoved innocent call through the flames—
All who have known an intimate sky and fear

Kiss the American earth, like ashes blown
Of history's maddest arson. Africa,
Our buried south, strike crisis to the core,
While glistening negroes mumble in the night,

Listless and racked and purchasable as bread,
Till Jesus, ointments, or the fiery dawn
Replenish their little wells of labored life,
Day upon dazzling day, night upon night.

Though symbols come in patterns never guessed
And twice removed, all that survives will show
The devious incendiary path
Of truth; no act, in solo prescience,

Will see the earth's immutable design
Undone. No man may speak alone; all weaves
In fluctuating gestures of retreat,
Retreat, until one flagrant sword is high.

Abe Lincoln, mightily alone, unwilling,
Lost, writes on the common walls. He knows
The toad-like multitudes, the truth turned wry,
And vagrant vengeance spiralling toward him.

Targets of history, broken backward, fall
To harsh examiners. Victims of truth,
So taken in retreat, come chainless home;
Their greatness has submitted and will serve.

xvii. *John Brown's Soul.*

Like painters with a flair for bloody skies
Who drown even a pastorate in strokes
Napoleonic to the very leaf,
Some men unbalance history with an act.

They fire towers while we agitate,
Equip our stance with bayonets, and charge;
They are not holy in the face of wrong,
Nor lotus-eaters with one pale long-view.

But searing antique static rooms with wrath
(Admired now in treatises, since Good
Is everpresent and the past has changed)
They run to meet the crisis in the streets.

They will, of course, meet martyrdom, be broken
In the wheels; their bodies will be piked,
Examples for the younger of like mind.
All will agree the incident is closed.

Pleased with our sentiment, idea of right,
We are the culpable who watch them go;
No song, no battle hymn will compensate,
Nor full revisions in the general text.

Who fancy opposites like valued stamps,
Precisely cramming pages with the facts
Until, the end forgotten, they call the game
More fascinating than they had believed,

Are mired and susceptible to shot.
Praise John Brown's body and his marching soul;
The way to action never was approved
Since education caught a Midas-touch.

Freemen are party to an album kept
With desiccated roses and clipped curls;
Ingenious disinfectants have removed
The odor of the blood, their fathers' names.

xviii. *The Election.*

Whose sovereign gestures voyage on the Day,
(Bed-wetters, poets, wagon-drivers, whores)
Toe-dancing in the reveries of choice,
(Imposters, cripples, flower-makers, clowns)
Or drowned in wilfulness, or drunk, or lost
(Patriots, boot-lovers, trigger-men)
In colors and paralysis of thought,
(Emigrés, sculptors, bowlers, claustrophobes)

Must skirmish toward the counting of the votes:
And who will gain salutes from withered arms,
Delivered into fables helplessly?
O who is best, who cauterizes dreams?

At night must neutral hands enumerate
The marks of acid bodies on the page:
(This way for life, this way for lovely life!)
The phosphorescent X, the people, you.

Out of the slums and fecal waterfronts,
Museum lawns with iron dogs and deer,
Across the glittering arteries of lakes,
Agreement rectifies the hosts of Wrong.

And when those voices, hopeful and diseased,
Sing out the furies of the happy, he
So nominated dies, must come, touched with
Their leprosy, to life no longer his.

Eden was different, its children whole.
But love with upturned, sky-lit palms will take
A freer congregation back, defying
Gates and wingéd guards, to build its home.

XIX. *Election News.*

Where graces of the feudal south deride
That telegraphic answer, French mores
Cherished like souvenirs from New Orleans,
Debar the brazen truth from drawing rooms,

Since now contention's color is adopted,
The fatal arras hung. As furious
As Catherine the Great, sweet ladies stamp
Newspapers to the floor, command a coach.

And gentlemen of that romance, upbraid
Their quarters with opprobrium and sex,
And all their cultured logic praises them:
Since flowering lawns approve, God must agree.

(Among that silken barbarism, too,
The pitiabie and slow, whose sheltered lives
Are moulded in the vacuum of good taste;
They can be used like furniture or shields.)

Though wine and lobster decorate their cloths,
Though piquancies of wit enspice the air,
Their laughter is electric and awry
Whose ease is stored in law-books, gunrooms, banks.

So much of good, under bad auspices,
Must splinter to debris before the just;
A thousand thousand years may lack enough
To build again with mortar and with love.

XX. *Liberty for Whom?*

Fountainous, amid the glass-worked rooms
Of puny politics, the issues come
Impossible to dyke with hands, or tame
With kisses, bribes, or hushed maneuverings.

Liberty for whom? Shepherd and wolf
Compute a measure disparate as poles;
Old allegories, valid as clichés,
Teach villainy and innocence alike.

The little foxes squirm; the people laugh.
Now pearl-caned privilege may hesitate,
May drop its lordly gestures when the mobs
Accept a primer's reasons for their own.

Our law's anatomies of freedom like
Anatomies of death, live deep in uncut
Indices; while innocents meet headsmen
In the dawn, those dusty definitions serve
Power and the taskmasters of wheels.
O he is Edison of the word who brings
(Adream with dynamos and newfoundlands)
Our buried heritage to life as huge
As smoking futures in a crucible.
The dark has monasteries; it will keep
Its prizes in the shadows, while it moves
With malice in the courts of honest men.
Elusive as a cancer bug, the simple
Truth; yet those who in corrals of death,
Sieged by the fury of a kingly eye,
Return to scrawl but one beleaguered Yes,
Stand in the tallest silhouettes of time.
Abe Lincoln, with old shepherds' hands, recalls
His humpty-dumpty cast of anecdote.
Liberty for whom? The people laugh.

xxi. *Declaration of War.*

Executor of crisis, Abe Lincoln treads
The shining White House floor—ordeals by fire
Tortures his concern, untimely snow
Submerges furniture, worries the lamp.
The merchant and the priest berate his eyes
With their totemic dance; good angels trek
Far daisy fields, a servant brings a tray,
And no one enters looking like a god.
The nation, like a split skull, lies untended
Over the flag-and-trumpet distances,
Whose people call for unity or blood,
Whose gunless armies roar upon the day.
All rally round the totem-poles of wooden
Principle, the gala witches beat
The drums, the village idiot is suddenly
Accepted into companies of men.

Since killers name both weapons and the day,
The kindly must submit themselves to kill
Or, struck to salt without one backward glance,
They sterilize the vista with dead shapes.

Abe Lincoln scans the toppled miles of ruin,
The punctual graves, the cryptic peace of fields
Unprinted with tobacco or with grain;
He counts the tortoise-like cripples of grief.

These walls are answerless; the house is dead.
He turns upon the inward plains; his heart
Is flooded and responsible. Surrounded
With the mad, he comes proclaiming war.

Visions of evil are fulfilled; the just
Contribute murder, learn to scheme; sunlight
Pianos chaos on the years that move
Patient and weathered as cold monuments.

xxii. *Emancipation Proclamation.*

The day is late; the tide is venial.
Nobody goes abroad in birdloud air
Except a sentry john-a-dreams for home,
A lookout analyzing shapes of mist,

When spasms on the great historic dial,
The fin-like arrow shivering, name one
Decision like a vise—"henceforward and
Forever after free"—the shaft inert.

O lovely mechanism, Christian myth,
The air is thorny with details of love,
Achievement like a language against time,
As buffalo and bird etched on the cave.

The history of man is seasonal
With ice, geography, bone-sculptured earth:
There is unique nativity in years
Remembered for the laughter of a man.

Abe Lincoln, mid-wife, scrawls his signature
While crisis splits like rivets showering;
What though the sparks may catch in furze somewhere
Precipitating what new barricades?

The ponderous foot of right is coolly down;
Nor may the wheeling of the birds unloose
The judgment pillared there, the light-house lovely
Word: inevitable the mariner.

xxiii. *Ascent to History.*

Gardens of olives float across the dusk—
Abe Lincoln joins their ancient tragedy,
For skull and crossbone have been hurled toward this
One democratic parliament of men.

April is underfoot; the dark compels.
The faith of creeping centuries returns,
Since Jefferson is by, and Lenin waits,
And history storms like riders in the night.

What have we to compute against the scores
Of blame? A few half-gestures, words like *love*,
A man superior among us,—not
Enough to vindicate a single slum.

Yet we are memoried and do believe
Increasing daylight since the whips of Ur;
Matching this life against ideas of death
We, blinded to the difference, rejoice.

Who burn like torches in the crowded dark
Have seen the morning's arc expand: freemen
In Egypt sang for less than those in Rome,
Byzantium or our own unfinished past.

When earth is weaponless and early-born
To sign its victory, as students marvel
On Cromagnon blades, men will rename,
Across the spiralled atmosphere that holds
White buildings and our ape-like documents,
Dear fables from that first America;
We are the earth's almighty, bent to bless
Harvests, stairways, and conjoined hands.

xxiv. *The Lonely Victory.*

Who would return through time and bolted doors
To bring a sun-touched axe down clean on wood,
Stands ready in the summons of ambition;
Deep in the grieved and populated shades,

Abe Lincoln wrestles with his doubting Self;
And if he scan Macbeth or Genesis,
Or knock his sprawling humor through the room,
That great unanswered body will not cease;
Whose gestures mean, not teacups or a tear,
But solitary lives dispatched to death.
One signature describes a century;
He hears the murmurs rise like distant guns.
Springfield is under and the War is real,
And men are challenged and responsible;
The hunchback and the fool combat his peace,
Clinging with brilliant fevers to the death.
Who will not censor what his eye records,
Or blanch to learn his personal iron great
Like a pylon in midsummer clouds, electrifies
Mortality, its carnival of towns.
Abe Lincoln, heavy-gestured, guides the day;
Vistas of newly dead are his, who hears
The cries of Banishment! whose victory is
Himself as everyman, defined for death.

xxv. *We Are Alone.*

No man trespasses gardens where his luck
Reflects the pleasures of identity
But, somewhere in a shadow of his mind,
He feels one huddle of forgotten bones.
As brutal as a fist across the mouth,
He hears, sometimes, his own high laughter stopped;
Or, naked in a mirror, reads the quick
And paralyzing stance of sudden death.
Alone, alone . . . who has not whispered it
Across the foreheads of a multitude?
Who has not murmured in the night some thing
The day would blight like terror on the mouth?
And drowning hands, like terror-opened flowers,
Disappear, and all the traffic of the sense
Submits, at last, unto the final dark;
And, like a leprosy, Love stains them all.

Then is the floating consciousness called home
To fight for reason and assert its day;
Then are survivors chosen from the damned,
And Wisdom named, and children of the light.
In such survival clearly was he named
Abe Lincoln of America and of
Our western day; no house or heart but wears
The chance for merit in those syllables.

xxvi. *The Progress of the War.*

Turn, turn, the bloody wrists must turn to rinse
Geography in zones of war; and if
The grail is changeable and liable
To fade and if, diaphanous, it sink
Untouchable of treaty, compromise,
Who is to lend his monstrous hand to close
Its luminous diseases, its death ray?
Slow cavalries of echo plunge through space.
Now more than cannon murders in the night,
Since all must vindicate prerogatives
Untested since the muralled fathers came;
The wheels go round like reminiscences,
Love's lifeless hands float on the reservoirs,
The mails are choked with smells of violence;
When barbarism like a bride comes home
The lamps grow mammoth and unquenchable.
Turn, turn, the bloody wrists must turn, until
One stainless handful silences the field,
When Grant and Lee have cauterized the earth,
Retreating down cold corridors of time.

xxvii. *A Backward Look: Time Under Glass.*

A backward look: all action stopped in air,
The philosophic minute as a glass
Enlarging gestures of the frozen where
Paralysis has claimed their century:
Flame on the prairies; against Manhattan, sails;
Commanded to that camera, the mind,
That would arrange its memories as real
As miniatures across the mantelpiece:

A bullet stops within a space that keeps
The killer from his next anonymous
To die; a tall pale woman under leaves
Stares on a letter, saying slowly God;
And casually, in Washington, or worlds
Uncaptured in bureaucracies of books,
That walker without escort, halted in
A shuttered window's telling lance of light.
The unlived magic of the mind may halt,
But not that sea of flame, that shoal-bound sail;
Each killer's aim was mutual and true,
And tall pale women sobbed a little while
Before the slow autumnal hours sent
Them comfortless to earth. All is undone,
And, like the eerie southward geese, loud
With utterance, with distant flashing wings.

xxviii. *End of a War.*

When morning trumpets hang like misplaced toys,
Lion-like, the mighty claws of conflict lope
Toward peaceful brakes; then do museums claim
The slashed accoutrements of civil war.
Those years reverberate like midnight gales
Echoing down the split and checkered sky
To join the memory of the world; the little
Commerce of surviving life begins,
And Gettysburg and Shiloh close like scars
Since human will employs biology
As curious as any in the books—
Its web-like armor, its blood festivals.
Ill and foolish will rehearse the dead
Particulars of guns, parades will show
Their weakness like a cancer year by year
Whose cause will seem extinct as Latin verse.
But on the marginal fields, inheritors
Will learn, through flashy cinema and subway
Reverie, the great communicating breath
That spoke a common purpose, and is gone.

The mind's antennae call men into life
As lovely as a castle undersea—
O strophed distance dangerous with dark
O lanterns of the loving on the waves.

XXIX. *Assassin's Night.*

Diminutive the play, since all must cross
Like dwarfs, ranging the smaller eye of some
Binocular; not theatre of war,
But cycloramas, gaiety of speech.
Among the swamping draperies, Abe Lincoln's
Monumental head . . . the curtain's up!
(Whose lives are but parentheses in time)
Quack! Quack! Left-handed laughter checkers night.
O quick the clamorous décor of Event,
Since all who have correctly come rebuke
Their world to crow on wit's felicity;
Refusing horror in the print, they must
Applaud in gloves the postures of the clown.
Time, like a tidal boar, unlooses its
White horses—hysterical in foam, they climb
Annihilating minutes to the brink:
Good Friday has survived. The earth is rent
With vengeance like a disembodied nerve
Since, unerring his black gun, one brooding
Judas has clumped back to Calvary.
Abe Lincoln's great cold body hangs in air;
His quiet heart moves through eternal dark
While human arms no longer hug the sun
Whose grandeur passes unpossessable.
Curtain is down. Confusion's miniatures
Enact all terrors of the ages in
One single night of one small century:
Their bladed cries strike on the senseless ground.

XXX. *The Funeral: Transcontinent, Transwilderness.*

Turns westward now the body of a man:
The little depots harbor multitudes
Who, in the fading ceremonies, touch
Some cornice of eternity with hands.

Legends unravel in the crowded dusk:
This one remembers gestures and a hat,
Another, words, a healing touch, a rhyme
More marvelled in the telling than the fact.

Women, who wait for tragedy, have seen
The hearse-like shapes across the morning square,
The faceless harriers, dark welcomings;
They are more wise and earthly than they know.

And men, unoccupied with tricks for gain,
Tumble like struck St. Paul to feel the rays
Of disbelieved and now escapeless truth;
Their homage is the lifting of a hat.

Voyage is punctual, the serpentine
Procession goes as though into a mist;
Springfield is waiting, and familiar graves
Swing on the lyric seasons of the globe.

Gone is the touchable bouquet of myth.
No enemy is there. Nor on the marble
Slab is any story true. The power
Of the past is greater than we dare to know.

XXXI. *And So Dedicated.*

Hysterical loud water where the sails
Careen, impertinent the breeze, since here
The holiday rides high. A crowd convenes,
Hilltopped about with bands and branches, slow

And ceremonious and wet with heat.
There, on the broken margins, wistful boys
Study the florid candy in their hands
Or stare, drydocked and yearning, towards the sea.

A somersaulting plane dives through the clouds
While speakers in their high and sun-struck hats
Drone over parasols; a dog goes crazy;
La! how the shrouded monumnet balloons!

Grooming limousines, the chauffeurs chat;
A liquor salesman fans the baby with
A dollar bill; the yawning moment nears,
(Distracting yachts!) someone remembers wreathes,

Elbows through boredom with the motions of
A frightened water-bug, drowns in applause;
Claude Banker is unbosomed of his psalm.
Now children, ripe with curls, are led (The Pink,
The Blonde, The Sweet anemones of wealth)
Toward festive cordage that withholds (O buried
Champion, never the mortal face of you!)
Climaxing signal for the murmurous.

All rush to claim him in their vested terms;
Some artifice of money will report
His inner meanings to the suspect poor;
The poor will doubt, reading the stone-cut words.

When memory is ancestor to act,
Nor plated with the subtlest minerals
Of greed, like veins of ore to our diviner's
Rod, unveiling will be dazzling.

xxxii. *Monuments.*

We are the lavish ones with gifts of stone.
Unable to the fashioning of life,
We lift a portico to house that heart
Not meant for snapshots or the tourist's day.

Here form is real; white arches grant the eye
Tall evidence. However deep that voice
Reechoes in the harmonies of crowds,
We fail to know its character or tongue.

And yet, at midnight or indifferent day,
The unschooled loving, never noticed, shy,
May touch their fingers toward reality,
With prayer-like words conjoin their love with his,

Who is the author of America
Through all surviving destiny or dream;
Assassins viciously abroad have caught
The warnings of devotion in their eyes.

And where that figure wanders late and wide,
A woodsman or townee, traditional
With hope, may watch the great head slowly bend
Implacable assent from village squares.

Abe Lincoln comes in moments known by these;
Not pyramids nor carillons with bells
May say their special wisdom to the earth,
Who are its fabulous inheritors.

xxxiii. *Interpretations.*

Who would impale him on a shaft, to frame
The ceremony of his ways like some
Dried insect of the Amazon, are quick
Among us; their implements—the famous lie,
Dramatic whisperings, the parchment files
Of ill-reputed medics—flash with malice
And that modern glee that counts the sculptured past
A vaudeville of fools and changeless Wrong.
Out of archaic photographs and books,
Specific as notations on a crime,
They catch his manner, postulate a scene
To cripple hints of grandeur on the page.
As blossoming and awkward as a tree,
Abe Lincoln must submit; he is alone
Before the crude omniscience of a man
Who lifts a private venom toward his eyes.
His manner, then, masked like a wooden doll,
Twitched by the whims of strings, must wear the coat
Of that perversity, as though it gave
The cut and texture of his bony form.
When rumor like a period piece goes down,
Then will the naked and arisen walk
Conviction's way, in final grace will stroll
Outlined with honor on the smoking page.

xxxiv. *The Uses of the Dead.*

Caught in the wreck of worlds, necessity
Becomes a criminal, robber of graves,
Since the demand is for a dream untoppled
Where, like cinemas, our values change.
We have unearthed them all: even the worst—
Some passionately wrong, others but wicked—
Are granted second chances in the service
Of those lost. Wisdom, perhaps, is underground,

We say; perhaps a letter buried where
A caesar or a saint has lain will echo
"Alas! Poor Yorick!"—polished in the sun,
Mouthing the latest digger's oracle.

Against a sky like iodine we life
Abe Lincoln's helpless relics from the earth;
More partisan than true, ignoring text,
Commit the vilest larceny of words.

While earth's immediately quiet hands
Cover his mouth, as cold as twisted bone
Those trophies of the fascist are announced
In accents of denial and revenge.

Dust of a dead man will not grow a fern;
A city is displaced tile upon tile;
Only the living innocent may learn
The uses of his honor and his praise.

xxxv. *Address to the Survivors.*

Thus have we come, Americans, too proud
Among the riches of these shores to say
Our heart's most central grief. O we are poor,
Counting but rags of a tradition here.

Nor will King Arthur come to Arkansas,
Some Moses lead us Mississippi-wards;
We are those lost, unlegended, alone.
Apollo is a movie-house in Maine.

Wreathed with the past, (those symbols of a home
Defined in story, danced on holidays)
We come to plains unpeopled with tall gods,
Nor heroes in the luminous underground.

Abe Lincoln, then, precipitate of dreams
That cross our pride, becomes that ancestor
For wisdom and identity; we sense
The sweet conjunction of his blood with ours,

Who are the getters of a race undared,
Unchronicled in any saga sung.
We are the challenged and may be the last
To test the possibilities of man.

Not Crete, nor wonders from the lands of ice
May match the ranging glory here begun
Since miracles went on with the Homeric
Skies, and deeds of lusty deity.

Surround him here, publish that victory.
Make kindliness contagious where he walked;
The selfsame ways—log hut to capitol,
Are liveable and all to do again.

A tyrant on the marbled page may read
Devotion told beyond the whips of fear,
See monuments like cities in the sky
Defined within the precincts of our hearts.

XXXVI. *The Starting Point.*

As volatile as pity in the stress
Of change, we on ambitious earth, like flame
On sun, throw, once in a thousand years,
Some unguessed arm of fire toward the stars;
Abe Lincoln lost, bequeathes for relic: dust,
Fading words on blueprints, and a lonely son—
Thin parcels of such ornament as would
Become the least inhabitant of flesh.

His company is gone, his enemy
Like Egypt or Cathay, museum-banished;
Yet have we known blood-relative and heir,
Whose carrion skull, marked *Rome, Berlin*, repeats

The death-wish in his tribal monotone,
Whose sterile hands, immaculate with lust,
Put scars of black attrition on earth's face
As loveless as a hurricane or plague.

The year is crucial and the choice is ours.
Direction spreads its arching strands that are
(Dark-in-light, Light-in-dark) so strange, so taut,
So venomously threaded with defeat.

We are the struggle and, for now, the end
Of all defined progress in the fairest book;
Who split from dust to beauty have obeyed
Constants of physics, are champion and foe,

Solomon's-seal, adder and dove, churned
Toward stature in these green primeval years;
Example with his eyes, may now we learn
Such repetitions of our deity.

Who dreams what embryos we are, what wombs
Exotic as the unhatched Gobi shells?
What contradictions, delicate as veins,
Duel toward victory in millennial poise?

In dreams we make sweet possibility
And are the husbands of its upward life;
More meltable than snow across the palm,
Tomorrow smokes within a chemist's glass.

That gay myopia of dreams persists
Through terror, downfall, and the stain of blood;
The capturable Now, the starting point, awaits
Who must decide, and in hunger's logic, act.

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